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Viewing cable 06RIYADH3315, HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE: LIMITED

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| Reference ID | Created | Released | Classification | Origin |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 06RIYADH3315 | 2006-05-02 15:28 | 2011-08-30 01:44 | CONFIDENTIAL | Embassy Riyadh |

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/01/2016
TAGS: [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [KIRF](#) [KWMN](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE: LIMITED
OPPORTUNITIES, POOR QUALITY

REF: 2005 RIYADH 9116

¶1. (C) Summary: Higher education in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia offers limited opportunities for students, particularly women and Shi'a. What is available is of questionable quality, suffering from centralized and religious control, poor student preparation, and difficulty in recruiting professors of international caliber. Many consulate sources believe that the system is too broken to fix; many wealthy Saudis go to schools in Bahrain, the Gulf, and further away. Private educational institutes meet some of the excess demand, and even the public universities have established fee-based programs for students who are not accepted into their free mainstream offerings. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Information reported here is based on conversations and meetings over the past year by the CG, PolOff and the PAO. Related past reporting includes 2005 Riyadh 9531 and 2005 Riyadh 9468, on specific universities in the EP, and Riyadh 1982, Riyadh 1196, Riyadh 614 and Riyadh 332, on discrimination in the education system.

TOO MANY STUDENTS, NOT ENOUGH SCHOOLS

¶3. (U) The Eastern Province (EP) is home to two major universities - King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM, 5,000 students) and King Faisal University (KFU, 14,000 students). The first private university in the province, Prince Mohammed University (PMU) is set to open in Fall 2006 with an initial class of 600 students. The Kuwait-based Arab Open University (EP branch, 800 students) provides a split distance-learning/in-class option in Al Ahsa governorate. The Health Sciences College and the Teacher's College in Dammam have small classes each year. The Jubail Industrial College (JIC) in Jubail and the Institute for Public Administration (IPA) in Dammam offer targeted programs for a few hundred students to train them for industrial and government work respectively.

¶4. (SBU) All of the public schools provide full tuition plus stipends to accepted students. All of them also have many more applicants than they can accept. KFUPM, considered an elite institution, accepts about 10% of the 17,000 students who apply. JIC accepts about 11% of its 7000 applicants. Even KFU, responsible for meeting the higher education needs of the EP, only accepts 25% of the applicants for its nursing program, for example. The Dammam Health Science College caused traffic problems at its downtown location on the day it held entry examinations for applicants last summer. "It's a country-wide problem," says the vice president of King Faisal University, Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Saati, noting that there is huge gap each year between the number of high school graduates and the available seats at colleges and universities.

¶5. (C) Opportunities for women are even more limited. KFUPM, JIC, and the Dammam branch of IPA only accept men. "We are the university that admits girls," said Dr. Yussuf Al-Gindan, president of KFU. Not all of the departments at KFU are open to women, however, and some subjects are offered to women on alternating years to maintain segregated classes. Women are often taught via closed-circuit television, as male professors are not allowed in the women's section of the campus. Women are also relegated to second-rate facilities. PolOff has heard of one biology student communicating by letter to her professor about a difficult lab assignment; due to segregation rules they are not allowed to meet in person, nor can he examine her lab work.

¶6. (C) Limited access to higher education is also felt keenly by members of the Shi'a minority in the Eastern Province. Many Shi'a consulate contacts assert strongly that there is outright discrimination limiting acceptance to universities for Shi'a applicants, regardless of test scores and other qualifications. One top Shi'a student who applied

to the Political Science faculty at Riyadh's King Saud University was told that field was not open to Shi'a. Repeated attempts to open a university in the Shi'a city of Qatif have failed to gain government permission. In the most recent attempt last fall, a delegation of Shi'a community members was told that conservative members of the royal family would not allow a branch of the Arab Open University in Qatif. Shi'a women have particular difficulty gaining a higher education, as they are less able than men to travel to places with more opportunities.

A SYSTEM "ROTTEN AT THE CORE"

17. (C) "The Saudi educational system has produced garbage for the last 30 years", says Abdul Aziz Al-Turki, a prominent businessman from an influential family in the Eastern Province. ConOffs have heard similar sentiments from many other sources, many pointing to the overwhelming control of the religious establishment over the country's education system. Mohamed Yusof Rafie, VP of Industrial Relations at Saudi Aramco says there is a need for more attention on English and science and less on "the study of Quranic inheritance laws during 5th grade." An American petroleum engineer at Saudi Aramco told PAO that "none of the Saudis educated in-country are qualified for the work (as petroleum engineers). We hire them anyway, but their training is lousy." And from Abdul Karim al Mutawwa, a businessman from the Shi'a community - "the education system is rotten at the core. The extremists have too much power and it affects everything." (Note: Saudization laws have limited the business community's ability to hire expatriates, making them more dependent on the Saudi education system to produce skilled labor. Many complain that the government has required Saudization without strengthening the education system, creating a shortfall of skilled labor. End note.)

18. (C) Many colleges and universities, including KFUPM, JIC, and PMU, require students graduating from the Saudi public school to do a 'preparatory year' of study in English and math before starting the regular degree program. Saudi press reports assert that 87% of Saudi high school graduates do not have basic English skills. "The English curriculum is very weak; the students need a prep year," agrees Dr. Issa Alansari, the president of PMU. For many students, the prep year is challenging; JIC has a dropout rate of over 50%.

19. (C) The schools and the academic community in the Eastern Province are much more strictly segregated than other professional areas, such as business. Interaction with outsiders is discouraged. Many administrators complained of the difficulty in recruiting internationally qualified professors. Officially, Ministry of Foreign Affairs approval is required for ConOffs to visit KFUPM or KFU; individual academics and administrators will meet with us at 'neutral' locations but interaction with students is difficult. Consulate Public Diplomacy programming that has successfully reached students has been offered at off-campus locations near the university.

WANT A QUALITY EDUCATION? LEAVE THE COUNTRY

10. (C) Solutions, both at the individual and the government level, have centered on finding quality education outside of the country. In the Eastern Province, many people take advantage of the 1-hour commute over the causeway to Bahrain to access a better education system. Saudi students at all levels, from grade school to graduate school, commute to Bahrain each day. At the Arab Open University branch in Bahrain, for example, there are almost 1000 Saudi students. Many people also go further away, within the Gulf countries and elsewhere. Saudi Aramco sends 300 people to study at US and other universities each year, after a preparatory post-high school year.

¶11. (C) The Saudi government, with the announcement in June 2005 of scholarships for 15,000 Saudis to study abroad, chose the same option. The response was overwhelming; more than 47,000 Saudi students applied for the scholarships in the first six months. The pressure on the limited resources of the Saudi universities has decreased as a result; administrators at KFUPM, KFUPM, JIC and other educational institutes have told ConOffs that the scholarship program has affected their applicant pool. Most consulate contacts believe that the scholarships have been administered fairly to date, regardless of gender or religious affiliation. The Shi'a community has benefited tremendously. Shi'a community organizers in Qatif and Al-Ahsa areas have helped hundreds of students navigate the university and visa application procedures. Over 300 students attended a Study in the USA Seminar in Qatif organized by the Mission's Public Affairs section. There are indications that as many as 30% of the scholarships have gone to Saudi Shi'a (although they comprise perhaps only 10-15% of the Kingdom's population) because the Shi'a have sought out the opportunity more aggressively due to their circumscribed opportunities at home. Funding for women includes the option of a stipend for an accompanying 'muhram' or guardian. Some women have taken advantage of the opportunity, although many still face family opposition to their travel and study abroad; more than 90% of the scholarships have gone to Saudi males.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR MOVES INTO SAUDI EDUCATION

¶12. (SBU) Privatization of higher education is starting in the Eastern Province. Many private institutes now provide diploma or certificate degrees in the Eastern Province. They are of varying quality; some like the Al Bassam Institute have partnered with on-line diploma mills under USG legal investigation. Others, like DirectEnglish, offer legitimate English and computer courses. Public universities in the EP have recently opened 'parallel tracks', where students pay tuition. At KFUPM 800 students a year are accepted into the 'self-budgeting community college'. KFUPM's medical school accepts a small class of paying students as well, "where we test new, expensive teaching techniques," said the university's president. JIC has also started a tuition-based program for students who are not accepted in the regular track. The for-profit Institute for Industrial Management and Information Technology offers a diploma modeled after KFUPM's curriculum.

¶13. (C) Prince Mohammed University, opening in Fall 2006 will be the first private university in the Eastern Province. It has had strong support from the eponymous Governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Mohammed. PMU will be an expensive university with high aspirations, and has been developed in close cooperation with the Texas International Education Consortium. Like the Arab Open University branch in Al Ahsa which is supported by Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz, it has a different curriculum than the public universities along with a high-level royal sponsor. "We expect to be the most distinguished university in the Middle East," says Dr. Issa Alansari, the president of PMU. The manager of the Khobar branch of DirectEnglish told PAO that he considered developing an inexpensive, for-profit, college, but ran into government obstacles. "The government only wants expensive places with Olympic-size pools," he said.

¶14. Comment: The Saudi system for higher education in the Eastern Province is unable to meet student demand. Real reform in the Saudi education system remains elusive. The emergence of private universities like the Prince Mohammed University and the Arab Open university will help provide better options, but so far remain small. Many working-level university administrators in the EP requested ConOffs' assistance in creating linkages with US universities and professors. Given the influence of the religious establishment, such activities should be carefully designed, yet are desperately needed, as noted in the Public Diplomacy Strategy for Saudi Arabia (reftel). Scholarships to study

abroad are a welcome relief to the pressure on a weak educational system in Saudi Arabia, but are not a viable long-term solution to the need for educational reform.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
GFOELLER